

You can't take our freedom, but you can make us want it less

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The power of memes

'Freedom' of the national, self-determination variety is no longer viewed as a romantic ideal worth fighting and dying for. On the contrary, it is regarded as an inconvenience



It seems we live in a world that is increasingly defined by Internet memes. OK, perhaps that's only from the perspective of those few hundreds of millions who actually do have access to the world wide web; and even then, only those who use it to share (and sometimes originate) those instant graphical reflex reactions to absolutely anything everything under the sun.

Untold millions of other humans who have no such access will no doubt see things differently. And as for the trillions of other life-forms that also call this world their home... animals, plants, bacteria and so on... well, who knows what defines it from their perspective?

Certainly it will not be harrowing images of dead Syrian toddlers on beaches, complete with suitably heart-wrenching prayers or quotations; nor will it be any of the political, philosophical or witty epigrams so often misattributed to the likes of Mark Twain, Winston Churchill and the Dalai Lama.

But as I can safely assume that this article will not be read by anyone living outside the Internet access domain... still less by any animals, plants or bacteria... the Internet meme perspective is as good as any. Not an event is reported in the entire world, it seems, without instantly finding itself framed for instant consumption as an Internet postcard: as a rule, boiled down to a single 'message' that reduces the impact of the event in question to little more than a fleeting soundbite.

How blessed are we, then, to live in an age when even the most complex and profound of issues can be distilled to something as simple and inconsequential as a viral photo with a caption. No wonder we all suddenly know so much about absolutely everything: knowledge itself has been condensed into a series of kneejerk reactions that don't actually require any thinking to appreciate...

Still, some of those Internet memes can be pretty darn ingenious at times. There was one recently that spoke volumes about the curious era we live in: though whether or not that was its intention, I cannot say.

It came out immediately after the Scottish Independence referendum last year: a close-up of Mel Gibson's blue-faced William Wallace from *Braveheart*, taken from the scene where he suddenly realises he's been betrayed by his own allies at the battle of Stirling Bridge.

No amount of war-paint could disguise the shock and disillusionment on his face. The caption read (though there were infinite variations on the same theme): "You mean... they took our freedom?"

Like all memes it is kind of reductive really. Scotland may have rejected Independence at the polls, but it doesn't follow that its people are any less 'free' than they might have been with a different result. It's also a slight stretch to compare Scotland's drive for self-determination today, to the brutal wars with Edward Longshanks in the 14th century.

Alex Salmond may have argued that the Scots were subject to a UK-based government they did not elect... but there was no attempt to gang-rape newly-married brides on their wedding night, or anything like that. Even the attempts to disembowel/dismember the Scottish Nationalist Party were limited strictly to a symbolic plane. Wallace himself would almost certainly have been unimpressed.

But on another level a comparison can be made: what seems to have changed since *Braveheart*'s time (and much more recently) is not just the way countries achieve self-determination: but the value of self-determination itself.

In *Braveheart*, it was a strangled cry escaping the lips of a man being drawn and quartered: "You can take our lives, but you can't take our freedom!"

Cliché, perhaps; and anatomically improbable, too, given that Wallace's intestines would have been all over the execution podium by that time. But it is undeniably a powerful line, appealing as it does to an enduring principle that transcends all earthly political foibles. In fact, *Braveheart* almost certainly wouldn't have been the global blockbuster it was, if it didn't somehow tap into a deep-seated human preoccupation felt by all peoples and all times, everywhere.

And what is more visceral an emotive force, than the eternal struggle for Freedom?

Today, however, the dynamic has changed. 'Freedom' of the national, self-determination variety is no longer viewed as a romantic ideal worth fighting and dying for. On the contrary, it is regarded as an inconvenience that might upset an applecart most people would much prefer remained in place.

Just look at the arguments of the No campaign in the Scottish referendum last year. An independent Scotland was projected as a downright 'impossibility' – as if no country in history had ever survived the severance of its umbilical cord with a parent nation, and gone on to prosper.

Try telling that to the Marines, I remember thinking. They're American; they'd know a thing or two about economic success after a war of independence from Britain...

We were also told that an Independent Scotland would be instantly evicted from the EU. It would be left to fend for itself, increasingly isolated in a hostile world, without so much as a currency to call its own...

I imagine Edward Longshanks felt much the same way, though his motivations were arguably more of the world-domination variety. Most likely he inwardly laughed at the idea of Scotland flourishing as a sovereign kingdom in its own right. And this is perfectly understandable: the political establishment of any day would obviously argue in favour of its own supremacy.

What's changed, then, is the perspective of spectator nations – the 'audience' if you like - all of which would no doubt agree on paper that 'freedom' and 'self-determination' are noble values in themselves. And yet, when the prospect of a newly minted independent EU member state materialised in their own backyard in 2014... the same spectator nations suddenly lowered their appraisal of those values considerably.

Suddenly, 'freedom' became a thing to be laughed to scorn.

That's roughly what happened in Scotland last year... and the same thing is happening in Spain right now: where the region of Catalonia faces an election in which pro-independence parties are expected to win comfortably.

Without entering the merits of the particular arguments – it is natural that Spain would oppose an independent Catalonia; just as it is natural that many Catalans would willingly secede from Spain – what once again emerges is that the rest of Europe is increasingly taking a dim view of the principles at stake in this decision.

This, for instance, was the Spanish Prime Minister's reaction: "Catalans aren't being told the real consequences of independence... it would [mean leaving] the EU. What would happen with pensions? There are many more pensioners than contributors. What would happen with financial institutions, with bank deposits, to the currency?"

Naturally, expelling Catalonia from the EU is not a decision for either Spain or the UK to make. But in both cases, the threat was duly repeated by the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and most European political pundits.

Even today, with a least two separatist regions of the EU 'dangerously close' (from the EU's perspective) to seceding and forming new, independent countries, it remains unclear how the EU would actually deal with the situation in practice.

Catalonia's regional prime minister Artur Mas – like Alex Salmond in Scotland – argues that there is no precedent that allows the EU to punish a country for independence by expelling it from the Union.

"In the EU treaties, and more precisely in the Lisbon Treaty, there's no consideration of such a case. It's not been considered simply because they never thought that one day it would come about. Consequently, there's nothing in writing. They don't say what will happen to the rights of citizenship held for many, many years by Scottish citizens or Catalans; citizenship rights that can't be annulled or swept aside overnight."

I have yet to hear a single meaningful answer to this question, even though Europe has been pondering this dilemma for years.

Meanwhile, coverage of separatist issues by the European has been spectacularly unsympathetic to the causes of 'freedom' and 'independence' within Europe... and almost invariably in tune with the establishment view. So when Catalonia holds regional elections, the European media are more concerned with how a pro-Independent victory might affect the international stock market exchange, or the value of the euro.

What's entirely missing from the equation is any sense of history whatsoever – any acknowledgement, for instance, that there wouldn't actually be a Europe today, were it not for

isolated regions breaking away from the remains of earlier Empires in other centuries. Even recent history has been forgotten: consider, for instance, how utterly different Europe's reaction had been to the prospect of an independent Kosovo as recently as 2008...

Also missing in action are any trace of romance and idealism. Where only a few decades ago countries were lauded for shaking off their colonial shackles – and any number of other classic films celebrate this achievement, from 'Lawrence of Arabia' to 'Gandhi' to 'Land and Freedom', etc. – the trend today is to openly frown upon such aspirations as unmannerly and seditious, if not downright preposterous.

We have, in brief, been robbed of all the magic... and left with only logistical practicalities and an ocean of scaremongering.

Which brings us back to the 'Braveheart' meme. What would the movie have been like, had the battles taken place in European negotiating chambers today, instead of on the rolling Highlands of Scotland 700 years ago? How would audiences react, if instead of bloody battles and devastating emotional appeals for 'freedom', we were treated to visceral cries of: "You can take our lives, but you can't do anything to threaten the finely-balanced global economy which guarantees our pensions!", etc.?

It would be an instant flop, I'd say. Critics would unanimously slam the lack of any truly meaningful human emotion in the script; it would be dismissed as a cynical devaluation of the one truly noble human aspiration... quite possibly for political purposes.

Cinema-goers would almost certainly feel cheated by a plot which focused only on the more mundane, technocratic implications of a struggle which should (if presented properly) also excite wildly euphoric responses to an eminently human dilemma.

Much worse, it would subvert the entire ethical framework of the story. In this new version, William Wallace would be the sulking, stropky, spoilt and unreasonable villain of the piece (he'd be well cast, come to think of it); while the patient but increasingly exasperated Edward Longshanks would be the real hero, for trying to convince Wallace that oppression of his people by the English was actually in their own interest....

Not the most exciting premise for a gushing historical epic, I suspect. But at least it would be terribly realistic. That is exactly how real national struggles for freedom – in 21st century form – are depicted in the press each day.

So they may not have taken our freedom in the end... but they have certainly managed to make us want it less.

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<http://tinyurl.com/nosd6pz>

Jungle Drum Prose/Poetry. <http://jungledrum.lingama.net/news/story-1890.html>